READ AND COLOUR RIVER STORIES

The story of Kaveri

written by **Priya Krishnan**
illustrated by **Ashok Rajagopalan**

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The Story of Kaveri *(English)*
First published in India, 2001
ISBN 81-86895-60-4

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Published by
Tulika Publishers, 13 Prithvi Avenue, Abhiramapuram, Chennai 600 018, India
email kaka@tulikabooks.com & tulbooks@md4.vsnl.net.in
website www.tulikabooks.com

Printed and bound at
Anjan International Media, 11 Greenways Road, R A Puram, Chennai 600 028, India

Distributed by
Goodbooks Marketing Pvt. Ltd, 76 Fourth Street, Abhiramapuram, Chennai 600 018, India
email goodbuks@vsnl.com
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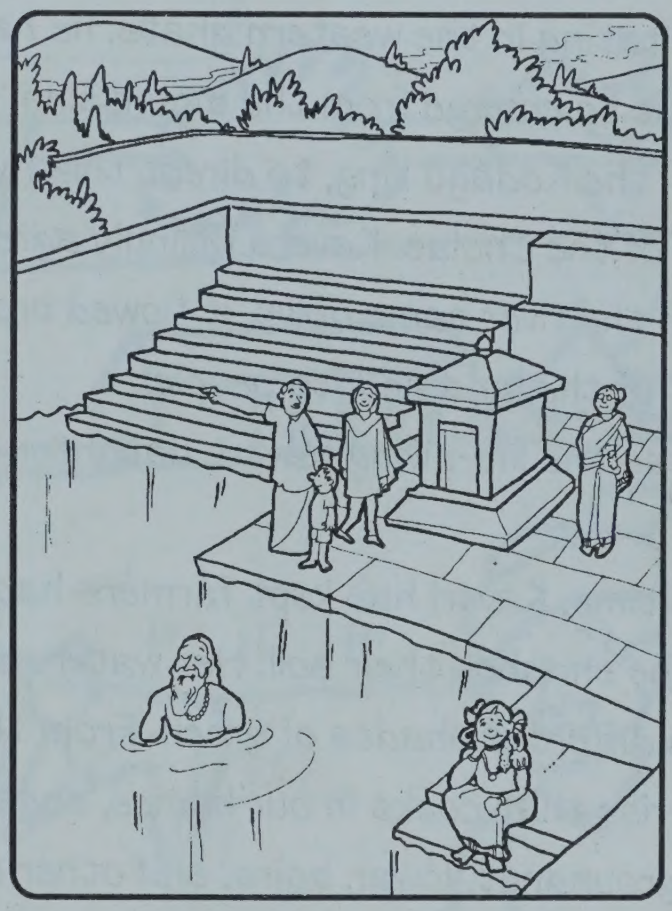
THE STORY OF KAVERI



written by PRIYA KRISHNAN
illustrated by ASHOK RAJAGOPALAN

Tulika

There was a time, the story goes, when the monsoons failed in the Chola kingdom of southern India. There was little food and no hope of rain. The people were in despair.

The sage Agastya had just returned from the Kodagu kingdom, today known as Coorg, in Karnataka. He knew he had to do something to help. While meditating in the western ghats, he had heard that a new river was about to emerge from the mountains. So Agastya Rishi requested Kavera, the Kodagu king, to direct this river towards the neighbouring land of the Cholas. Kavera willingly agreed.

By the time the river came down, it flowed broad and full, to quench the thirst of the land and its people.

This river was the life-giving Kaveri, daughter of the land of Kavera.

Since that time, Kaveri has kept farmers happy in Karnataka and Tamilnadu. She enriches their soil. Her waters and their hard work colour the land in different shades of green. From those swaying green fields comes the rice that cooks in our homes, sugarcane, cotton, coffee, coconut, groundnut, jowar, bajra, and other crops and fresh vegetables that we get in the market.

As she travels from the mountains to the fields, Kaveri trickles, tumbles, flows, falls, runs . . .

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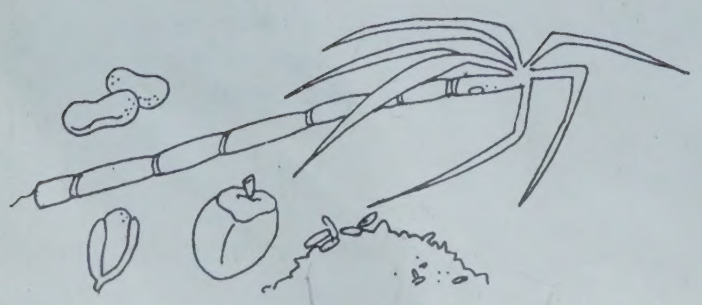
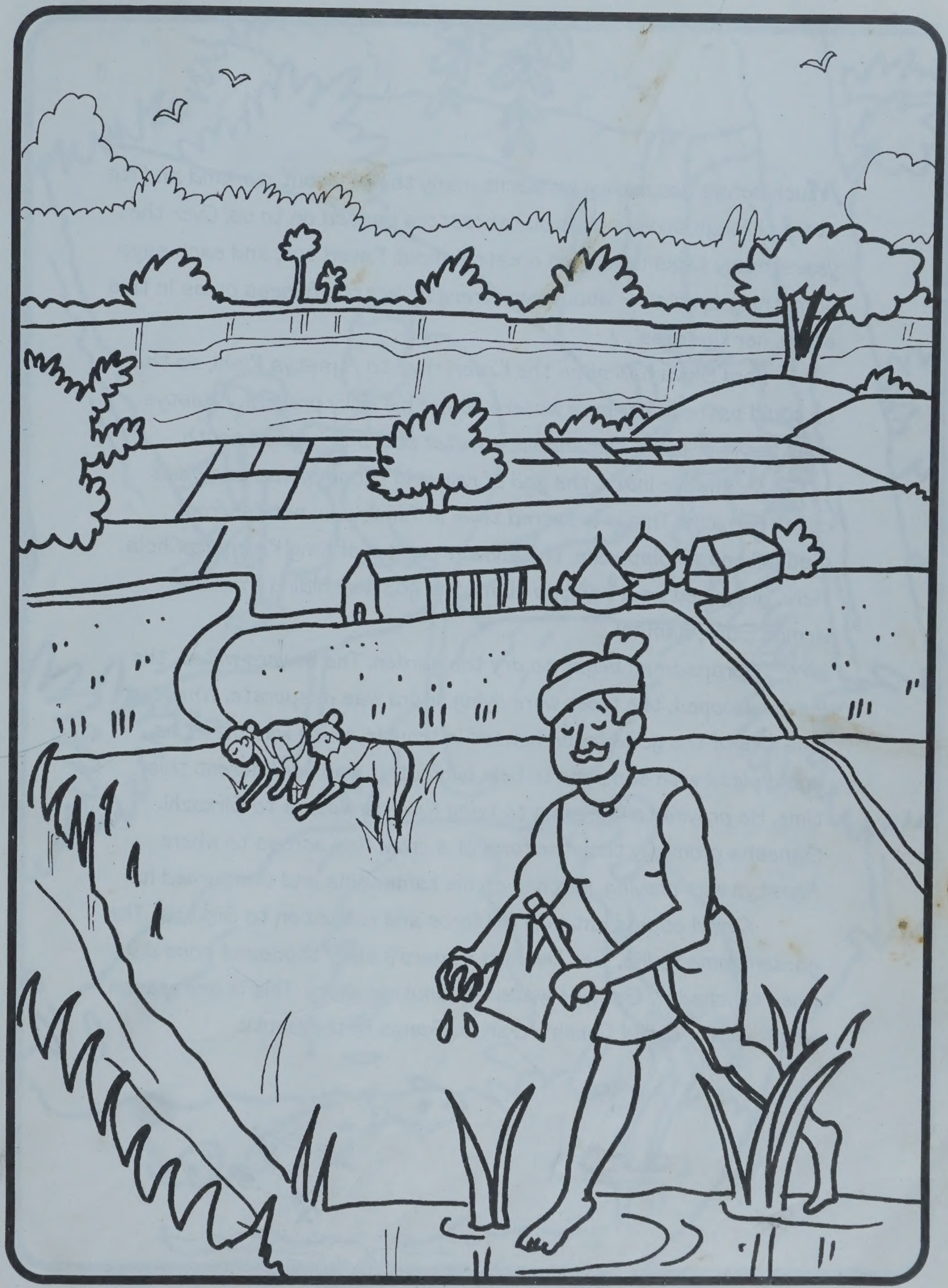




Working in the fields

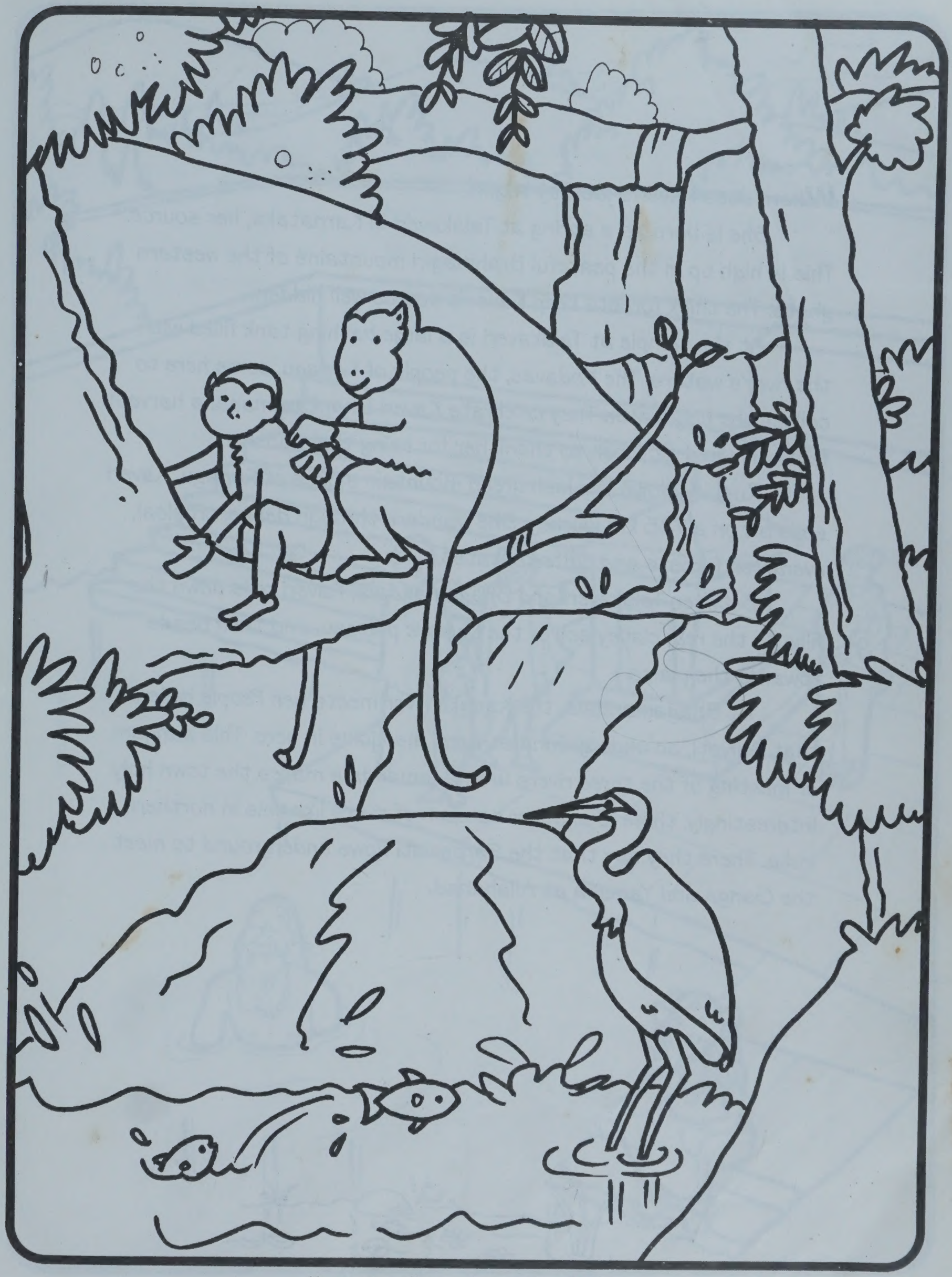
Much before geography, we learnt many things about our land and its rivers through stories that our ancestors passed on to us. Over the years, many tales have been created about Kaveri too, and each says something special — about her strength, her playfulness or, as in this story, her kindness . . .

Lord Shiva had given the Kaveri river to Agastya Rishi, so that he could bathe in her pure waters before his daily prayers. Agastya took the river in his kamandala, a water pot, and headed south.

Meanwhile Indra, the god of rain and thunder, was in a place called Sirkazhi. This is a sacred town in Tamilnadu, not far from Gangaikondacholapuram, the ancient capital of King Rajendra Chola. Here, disguised as a bamboo plant, the god was hiding from the demon Surapadman!

Surapadman began to dry the garden. The flowers wilted, the leaves drooped, the trees were dying. Indra was desperate. Whenever this king of the gods found himself in trouble, which was often, he would plead with someone to help him out. It was no different this time. He prayed to Ganesha to bring Kaveri's waters to Sirkazhi. Ganesha promptly took the form of a crow, flew across to where Agastya was praying, perched on his kamandala and overturned it.

Kaveri poured out with full force and rushed on to Sirkazhi. The garden came to life, just like King Sagara's sixty thousand sons did when touched by Ganga's waters in another story. This is one reason why Kaveri is called Dakshin Ganga, Ganga of the South.



Kaveri rolling down the hills

Where does Kaveri's journey begin?

She is born as a spring at Talakaveri in Karnataka, her source. This is high up in the peaceful Brahmagiri mountains of the western ghats. The thick forests keep Kaveri's source well hidden.

At the temple at Talakaveri is a large bathing tank filled with the river's waters. The Kodavas, the people of Kodagu, come here to collect the holy water. They celebrate Kaveri Shankaramana, a harvest festival in mid-October, to thank her for being their mother.

Rushing down the lush green mountain slopes of Kodagu, Kaveri sets off on a 785 km journey. She wanders through dense, tropical, evergreen forests and coffee estates.

Between Talakaveri and Bhagamandala, Kaveri rolls down the hills to the red, clayey soil of the Mysore plateau, and then heads towards the plains.

At Bhagamandala, the Kanaka river meets her. People believe that Sujyoti, an underground stream, also joins in here. This sangam or meeting of the three rivers in Bhagamandala makes the town holy. Interestingly, there is another sangam of rivers like this in northern India. There they say that the Saraswati flows underground to meet the Ganga and Yamuna at Allahabad.

The bathing tank at Talakaveri

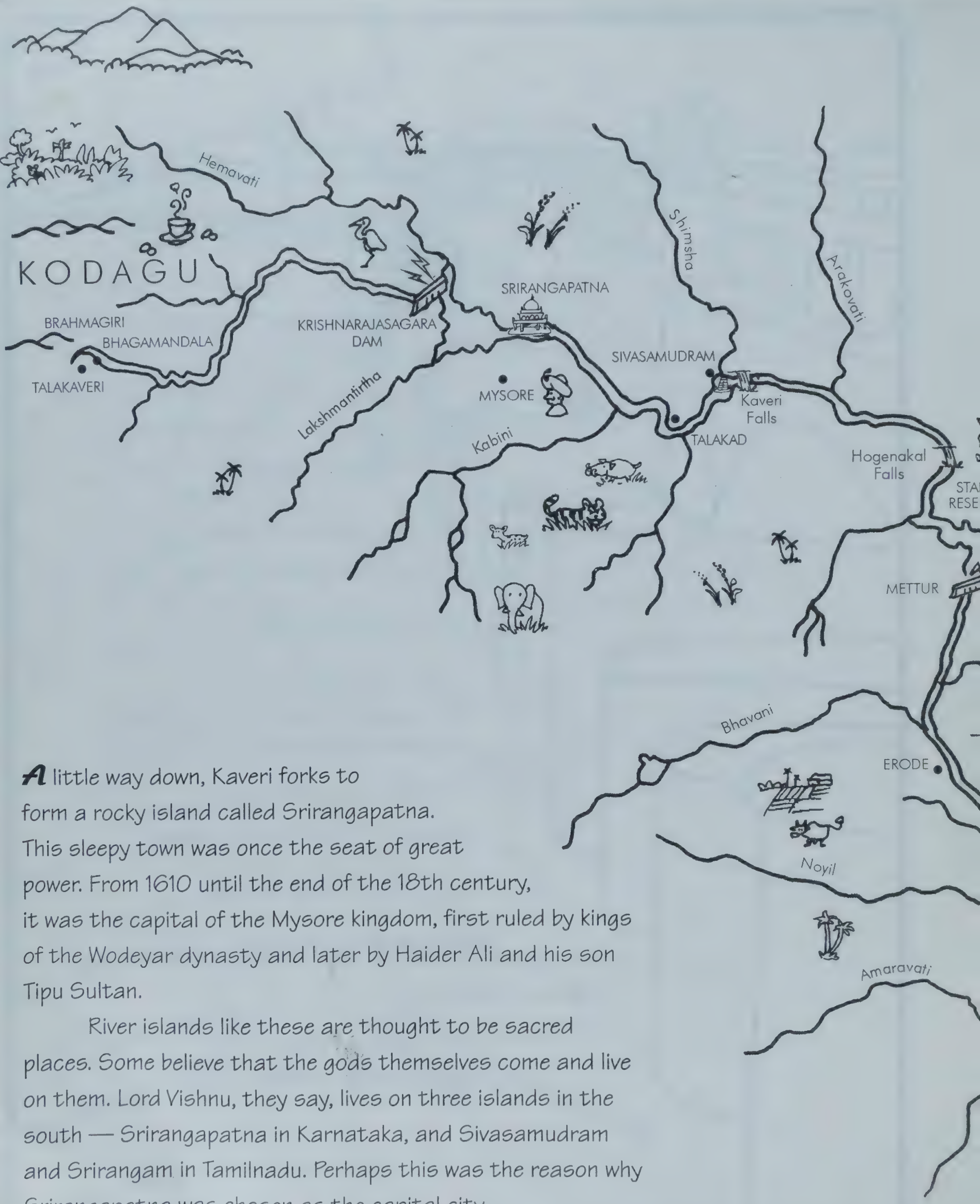
Water from the Kaveri is stored in many dams and reservoirs. From there it goes to people in their homes for drinking, cooking and washing. It also goes to farmers in the fields. To irrigate their crops, water from the dams is let out into canals that criss-cross the fields.

Some dams were built as far back as the 13th century AD when the Deccan — the area just south of the Vindhya mountains — was ruled by the Hoysala kings. The dams control Kaveri's waters, especially during the monsoons when she sometimes seems to swell up angrily and causes floods.

The Cholas were skilled at building dams or anicuts. In Tamil, 'anai' means 'to hold' and 'kattu' is 'something that is built'. A big dam called Grand Anicut was built across the river near Tiruchirapalli in the time of King Karikala Chola, in the 2nd century AD. With some improvements, it is being used even today.

In Karnataka, the huge Krishnarajasagara dam was built across Kaveri only in the early 20th century. From here we can see the beautiful Brindavan gardens of Mysore, watered by the Kaveri.

The Krishnarajasagara dam near Mysore



A little way down, Kaveri forks to form a rocky island called Srirangapatna. This sleepy town was once the seat of great power. From 1610 until the end of the 18th century, it was the capital of the Mysore kingdom, first ruled by kings of the Wodeyar dynasty and later by Haider Ali and his son Tipu Sultan.

River islands like these are thought to be sacred places. Some believe that the gods themselves come and live on them. Lord Vishnu, they say, lives on three islands in the south — Srirangapatna in Karnataka, and Sivasamudram and Srirangam in Tamilnadu. Perhaps this was the reason why Srirangapatna was chosen as the capital city.

The kings who ruled Mysore over the years respected all religions. Some of that spirit is left behind today. Hindus come to Srirangapatna to pray at the Sriranganatha temple, and Muslims to the A'la and Aksa mosques built in Tipu Sultan's time. Southeast of Srirangapatna, Kaveri passes by two towns well-known under the Hoysala rulers — Talakad and Somnathpur. Talakad was important even earlier, in the 8th and 9th centuries AD, under the Ganga dynasty. Though now buried under sand dunes, it is still a stop for pilgrims. Past Somnathpur, Kaveri moves slowly, through granite hills which tell us that we are at the southernmost edges of the Karnataka plateau.

At Sivasamudram, Kaveri passes through a narrow opening in the mountains, a gorge, and then tumbles down as rapids and waterfalls. She falls here with such force that her waters are used to generate electricity. A hydro-power station was started here in 1902.

Kaveri again cascades down as the Hogenakal Falls on the Tamilnadu border. In Kannada, 'hogenakal' means 'smoky stones' — the spray that comes up as the water falls on the rocks looks a bit like rising smoke! After this, the river becomes calmer. By now she has travelled 283 km. But there are still 502 km to go before reaching the Bay of Bengal.

The Stanley reservoir stands where Kaveri enters Tamilnadu. It provides water to people over a large area, even those living almost 400 km away. Further downstream, the town of Mettur supplies hydro-electric power to places around.

From here, the river flows southwards. Karur, on Kaveri's tributary Amaravati, was known long ago as Vanchi, capital of the ancient Chera kingdom. Coins and jewels from that time tell of a flourishing trade between the Cheras and the Romans, as far back as 25th century BC.

As she takes a final turn east towards the sea, Kaveri gradually splits to form a long island in between. This is Srirangam, the third of Vishnu's island homes. This popular temple town, founded in the Chola period, prospered up to the 16th century AD when Vijayanagara and Nayaka rulers controlled large areas of the south.

Canals take Kaveri's waters to the fields

Kaveri now begins to break up into many little branches to form a triangle-shaped delta. These rivulets empty her waters into the sea. Kaveri's delta is large and covers 14 lakh hectares of land.

The ancient town of Thanjavur stands at the head of the delta. It was home to three of the most powerful dynasties in this part of Tamilnadu — the Cholas, Nayakas and Marathas. Scattered around the town are old military buildings, palaces and religious monuments from these periods.

This area came to be called Cholamandalam since the Cholas ruled here for a long time, from the 9th to the 13th centuries AD. 'Coromandal', a word which comes from Cholamandalam, is now used to describe the southeast coast of India.

Thanjavur was the centre of government and trade. Farther east, the temple town of Kumbakonam was and still is the religious centre. People believe that all the sacred rivers of India, including Kaveri, flow into a big tank in the middle of the town. The Mahamakam festival is celebrated here once every twelve years, when people take a dip in these waters.

Close by is Tiruvayyaru, on Kaveri's banks. It is famous because the saint Thyagaraja lived here. He composed hundreds of songs in Telugu, in praise of Lord Rama. Music lovers come here every year to celebrate his birthday by singing his songs.

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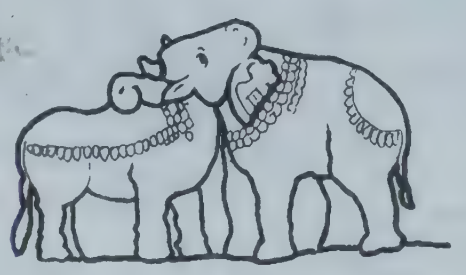


Elephant or bull?
A stone-carving at the temple at
Darasuram, near Kumbakonam

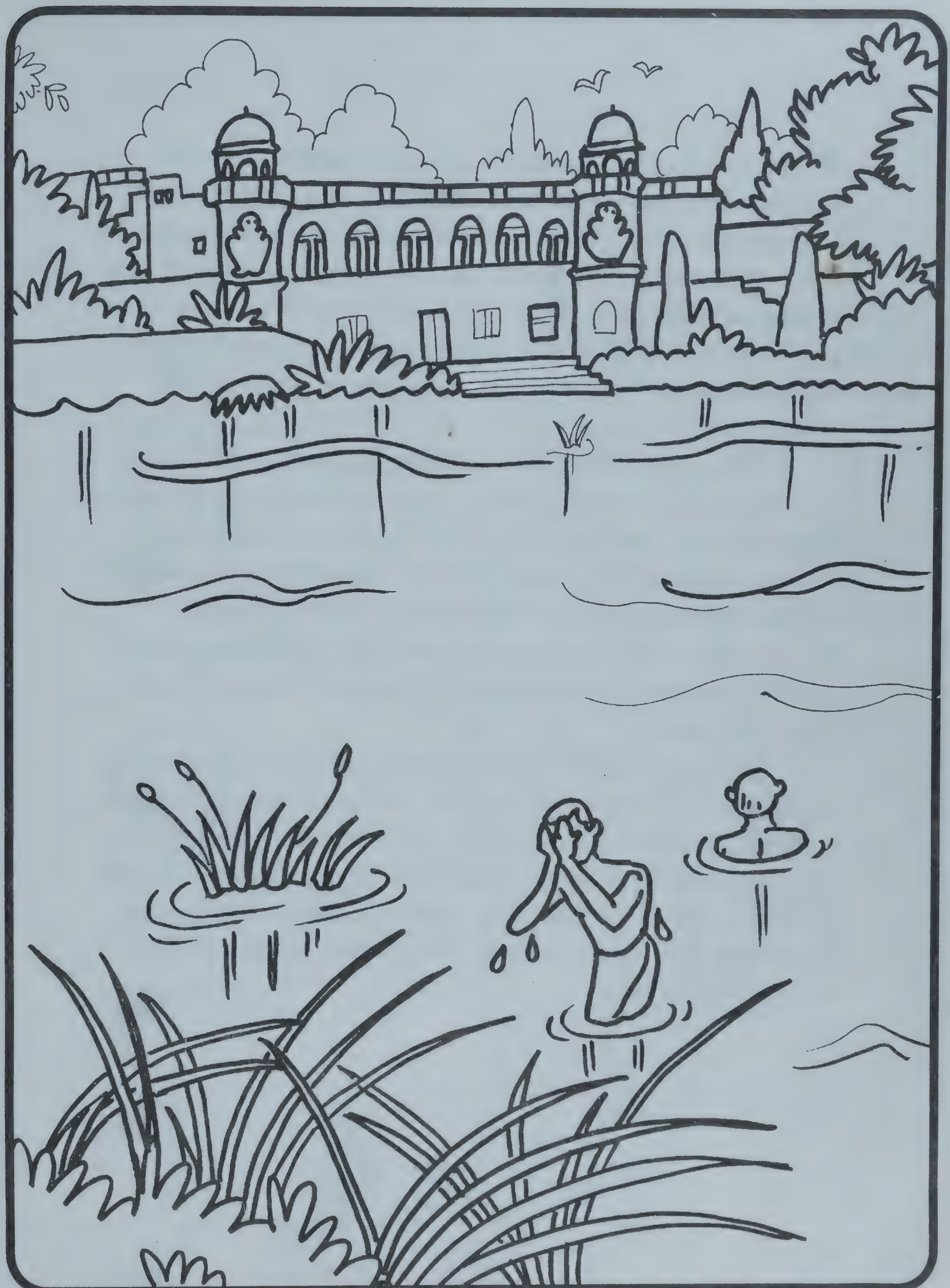
The Thyagaraja music festival at Tiruvayyaru

So much has happened and still happens around Kaveri, because she is believed to bring prosperity wherever she flows. Among the many stories about her, there is one that shows how strong and independent she was — and it won her this special blessing . . .

Pleased with the Kodagu king Kavera's penance, Lord Brahma gifted him a daughter, Kaveri. When she grew to be a young woman, Kavera wanted to find her a good husband. He decided that the rishi Agastya was the most suitable. But Kaveri was clear that she would marry him only if he promised never to leave her alone for too long. Or else? She would become a river and run away to the sea! Agastya said yes and they were married.

One day, the rishi was away at his prayers longer than usual. At home, Kaveri grew restless. She began to think he had broken his promise. Out she flowed in the form of a river. When Agastya came home and found her gone he was quite upset. He pleaded with her to come back. She agreed, but on condition that from now on she would have two forms — one as the river and the other as his wife. Agastya was so happy to have her back that he helped the river find her way to the sea and blessed her as she left: 'You will bring prosperity wherever you flow.'

So, in Tamilnadu, Kaveri is worshipped as Ponni, the Golden One — golden, because she leaves behind yellow silt on her banks which makes the land fertile.

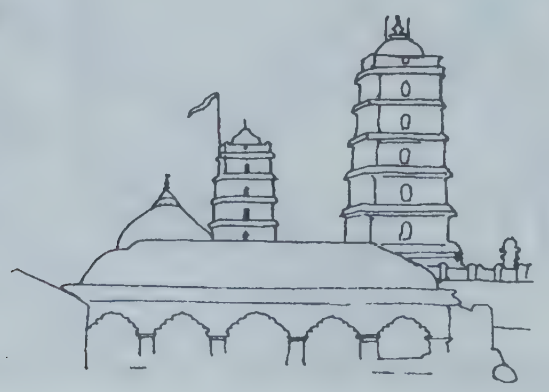


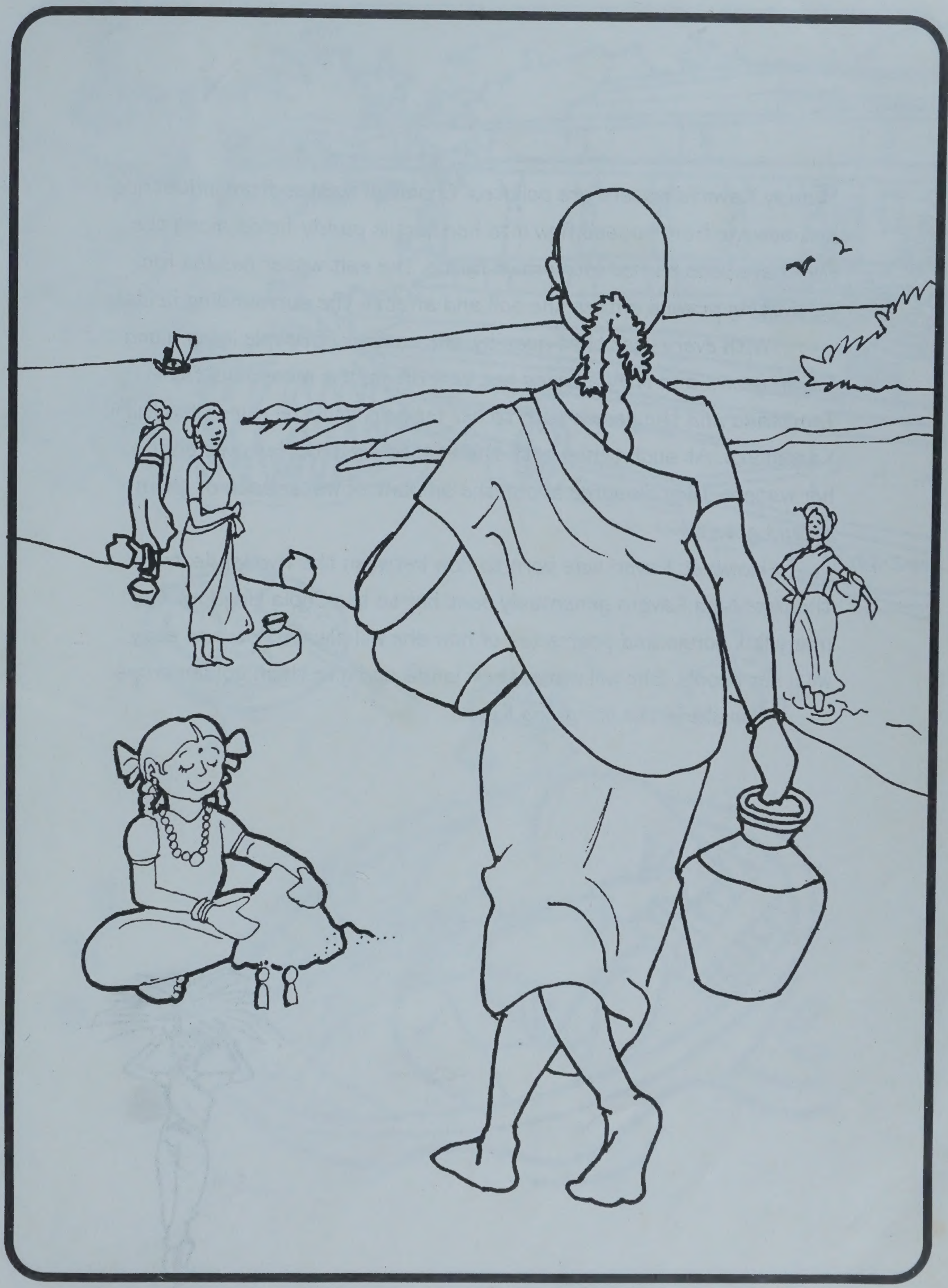
An old Maratha mansion at Thanjavur

Poompuhar, Karaikal, Tarangambadi, Nagore, Nagapattinam and Velankanni are towns which stand where Kaveri and her tributaries empty into the sea. In the past, all these were important ports for trade with the rest of the world. Apart from rice, merchants brought textiles and other luxury goods such as gems, corals, wine and papyrus from Asia and Europe. Indian traders also travelled to the Far East with their wares, such as spices, perfumes, muslin and cotton textiles and ivory.

Poompuhar, or Kaverippoompattinam as it was known, traded with Rome and prospered under the Cholas. 'Pattinam' usually means a town by the sea. Many Europeans came to settle in these coastal towns. Nagapattinam was one of the first Portuguese settlements in Tamilnadu. It developed under the Dutch and later the English. Karaikal came under French control. Under the Danes, Tarangambadi became Tranquebar. The oceanside fortress called Dansborg stands there even today.

The mix of people and tolerant kings made the Coromandal coast home to different religions. When the Marathas ruled Thanjavur, a dargah, or tomb of a Muslim saint, was built in the 18th century AD with the help of the Muslims of Nagapattinam. It brings many Muslim visitors to Nagore. A little farther south is Velankanni, a Christian shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Health. It attracts thousands of pilgrims from all faiths.





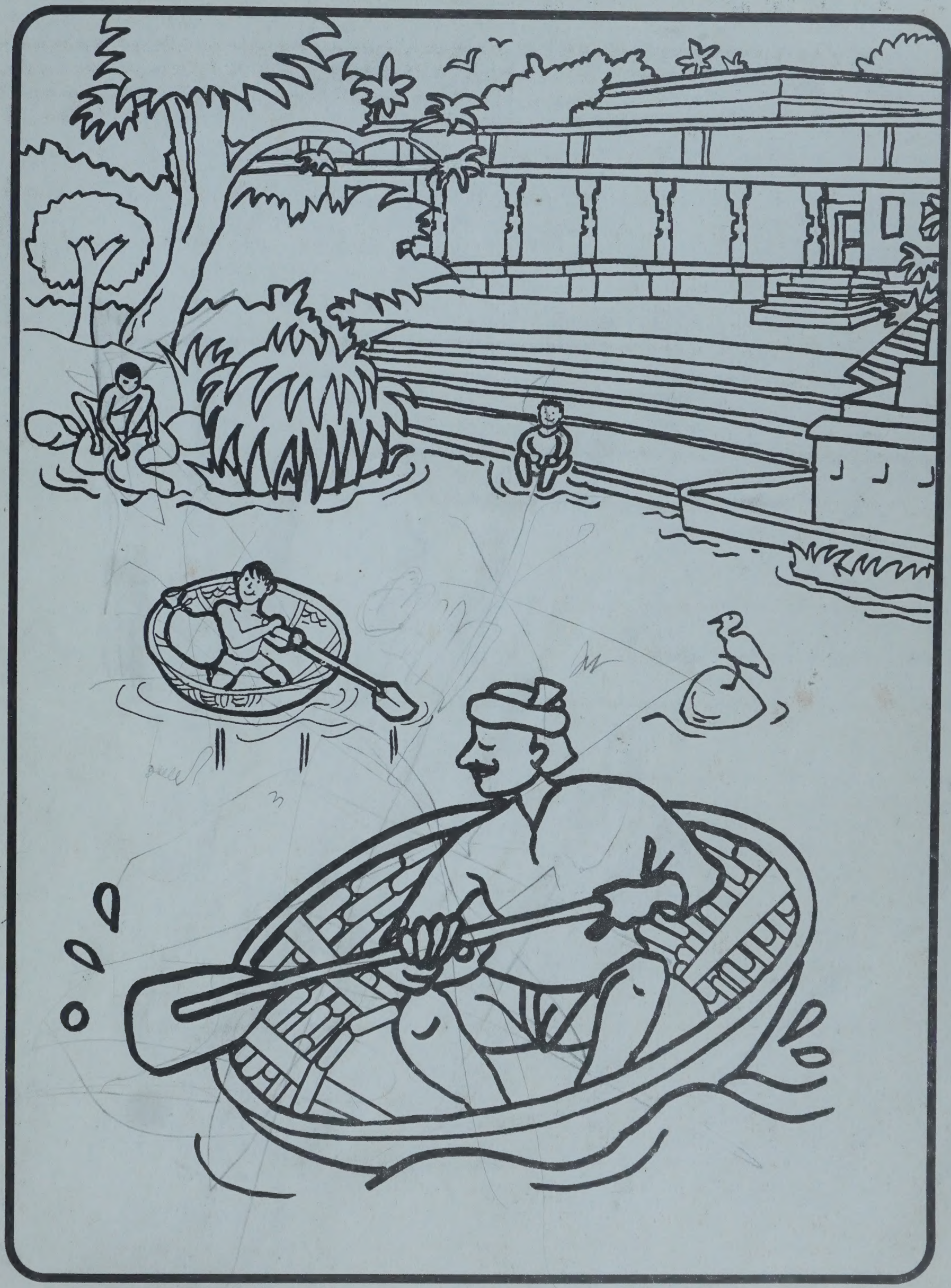
Where the river meets the sea

Today Kaveri's waters are polluted. Chemical wastes from industries and sewage from houses flow into her. Fertile paddy-fields along the river have been turned into prawn farms. The salt water needed for cultivating prawns enters the soil and affects the surrounding fields.

With every year that goes by, the number of people living along Kaveri grows and they all need her. Very often, the monsoons fail in Tamilnadu and the people turn to her for help. But the rains also fail in Karnataka. At such times both the states are troubled over sharing her waters. They disagree about the amount of water each of them should get.

However, Kaveri was born to flow between the two lands, from the time King Kavera generously sent her to the Chola kingdom. So, many folk songs and poems tell of how she will always flow and stay with her people. She will water their lands and give them golden crops.

For she is the life-giving Kaveri.



Round coracle boats are a common sight on the Kaveri

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This is the second set in the series, after Read and Colour Freedom Stories. Balancing simple text with detailed line drawings that can be coloured in by the child, the books introduce 7 to 12 year olds to life in and around some of India's important rivers. Older children will be able to read the text themselves. Younger ones may want the stories read aloud. All children, however, will ask questions. Take time to answer these questions and travel with your child on an interactive journey of learning.

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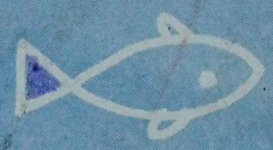

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